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ABSTRACT

Recognition of teachers has been a focus of the Diamond Jubilee Year of the National Council of Teachers of English (1985-86), which honors the outstanding teachers of some of the nation's leaders in this collection of testimonials about the influence these teachers have had on their lives. Contributors to the collection are Margaret Walker Alexander, Rudolfo A. Anaya, Edward Asner, William Attwood, Louis Auchincloss, Erma Bombeck, Wayne Booth, Ernest L. Boyer, Gwendolyn Brooks, Art Buchwald, Barney Bush, Jimmy Carter, Henry G. Cisneros, Lucille Clifton, Pat Conroy, Norman Cousins, Peter De Vries, Richard Eberhart, Mary Hatwood Futrell, Nikki Giovanni, William Goldman, Eloise Greenfield, Joy Harjo, Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, Kristin Hunter, Karla Kuskin, Nancy Larrick, Madeline L'Engle, James A. McPherson, Naomi Long Madgett, Haki R. Madhubuti, Bernard Malamud, Sharon Bell Mathis, N. Scott Momaday, Willie Morris, Edwin Newman, Richard M. Nixon, Louis Nizer, Felipe De Ortego Y Gasca, Simon J. Ortiz, Norman Vincent Peale, Walker Percy, Alvin F. Poussaint, Gloria Randle Scott, John B. Slaughter, William Stafford, Alvin Toffler, Darwin Turner, Montana H. R. Walking Bull, Robert Penn Warren, Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., Herman Wouk, and Jane Yolen. (EL)

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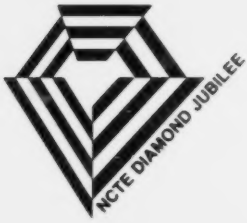


# A Celebration of Teachers

New Edition

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801

Staff Editors: Sandra E. Gibbs, Paul O'Dea

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I touch the future.
I teach.

—Christa McAuliffe
Teacher, Astronaut

## *FOREWORD*

When we reflected about the ways we might celebrate our Diamond Jubilee Year that starts in Philadelphia and ends in San Antonio, we thought less about geography than about the Council's journey since 1911. A substantial part of that history cannot acknowledge the most important accomplishment—the excellence of individual teachers and their enduring impact.

This collection of testimonials honors just a few of the hundreds of thousands who in this century quietly and eloquently influenced some of our nation's leaders. In our solicitation, we naively thought to impose a formula for response. Particularly since we looked more to our leading writers than to, say, our politicians, we should have known better. Responses came in in every style and length. The only common thread was the sincerity of appreciation for the difference that one English teacher made.

Because of the enthusiastic response to the first edition, which was given away at the Annual Convention in Philadelphia to begin our Diamond Jubilee Year, we are issuing this expanded New Edition.

We hope these tributes are a source of inspiration as we look back over three-quarters of a century through the eyes of distinguished former students.

John C. Maxwell
Executive Director
National Council of Teachers of English

## *PREFACE*

Few moments are brighter in the life of a teacher than the ones which are marked with a thank-you from a former student. A purist might argue that seeing the student's achievement as a partial result of what was taught should be pleasure enough. It probably is, but still we respond to good manners.

This collection is a series of thank-you notes. Some famous former students who are entranced with words thank some of their teachers who cared a lot about language. The teachers also seemed to care a lot about young people, enough to work around their foolishness and hold them to high standards of performance.

From these tributes to particular teachers, all teachers of English can take heart. Sometimes one must wait a long time before a student proves out, and those who trade fond reminiscences with old friends rarely remember to express the same kind thoughts to their teachers. We former students are perhaps guilty of silence toward our own mentors as well, so we can understand the unsaid messages. These, then, are letters to all teachers, written for all of us who have been negligent, written to all of us who might sometimes feel neglected and sorry for ourselves.

Attention to teachers is a central concern of the Diamond Jubilee Year of the National Council of Teachers of English. Talk about curricula and techniques means little unless there are people who give life to systems. Council programs and publications have offered methods and policies since the beginning, but the real point has been to make all teachers more effective in the classroom. We must know our craft as teachers, we must know our subject, but we must know even more: we must know how to care intelligently.

In that context we are particularly grateful to the people who have written to their teachers—and for our inspiration. They and others with many different kinds of talent are our reasons for facing another day in another class. We thank them for encouraging us.

Richard Lloyd-Jones
University of Iowa

President, 1986
National Council of Teachers of English

*THE TEACHERS*

History happens in small rooms.
And people grow
In your large hands like states
patiently won
From wilderness. But the work is slow.
You do not see the end and it is never done.

You are as clear as light; this is your mystery:
To give, to build the love you do not share,
And still to grow by this. You have no history,
Lose what you win, you who so deeply care.

For this largesse, this gift, words are too
narrow,
They are not needed. The praise is afterwards.
For you who are the future, wearing love at
marrow,
The praise is later, found in lives,
not words.

—May Sarton

Poet, Novelist

## *MARGARET WALKER ALEXANDER*

I have been most fortunate in my life in having very good and wonderful teachers throughout my life as a student.

My parents were my first teachers. My father, a minister, taught me how to write and memorize poetry, and how to read and study the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Dickens. He also taught me comparative religion and philosophy and encouraged me to be a writer. My mother, a musician, was also, like my father, a student of English and foreign languages. She taught me how to read and what to read. Before I could read, she read to me. I cannot remember when I learned to read, since at four I was reading. My mother later taught me how to organize a theme.

My high school teachers were highly prepared. Most of my teachers had done graduate work or held master's degrees.

My first white teachers were in college. Miss Fluke, a graduate of Northwestern, taught me freshman English composition. I won first prize as best student in her class. She told my parents I was head and shoulders above the rest of the class (at age fifteen) and that they should send me to Northwestern. My other white teacher was Otto Edward Kriege, a graduate of Heidelberg University. He taught me German, and I translated poetry by Goethe and Heine my sophomore year. That year Langston Hughes came to New Orleans. After reading my poetry he, too, told my parents to get me out of the South.

At Northwestern University I had master teachers in several subjects. But my favorite teacher at Northwestern, Edward Buell Hungerford, taught me creative writing. I wrote a book-length poem, "Jean Lafitte, The Baratarian," and I began my Civil War novel, *Jubilee*, under him. Also I wrote a short story called "Witches Eyes." Mr. Hungerford gave me A grades. If I had great teachers at Northwestern such as the Kittredge Scholar A. C. L. Brown for Shakespeare, and John J. B. Morgan, the man who wrote the book on abnormal psychology, my most memorable and brilliant teachers were at Iowa and Yale. At the University of Iowa I studied under Paul Engle, Norman Foerster, Professor Thornton (in History of American Civilization), Austin Warren (with Rene Wellek), Verlin Cassil and Vance Bourjaily, John McGalliard and Geoffrey Hartman. I also had the privilege of learning from two other Kittredge Scholars, Dr. Kuhl for Chaucer and Dr. Thompson for Milton.

1

At Yale, in American Studies, I studied television script writing, modern American architecture, and modern American literature. The literature class was taught by the great Norman Holmes Pearson.

Yes, I have had great teachers—all my life! How have they influenced me? They have molded me into the kind of person that I am.

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Novelist

## *RUDOLFO A. ANAYA*

When I graduated from high school in 1956, I had no real direction in life. I was not prepared to go on to the university, so I took classes at a business school. I didn't even dream then about being a writer.

I needed to work, and because I was still suffering from the aftermath of a very serious accident a year earlier, I needed to be understood on my own terms. Trinidad J. "T. J." Gabaldon was a businessman in town. He also taught business classes at the school which I attended.

He was a tall, dashing man, a sharp dresser, and a great lecturer who could make even beginning bookkeeping seem exciting. You could watch him lecture all hour and never see that the middle three fingers of his left hand were missing. He knew how to hide that one flaw.

What did he give me? He gave me hope in myself, because I, too, was hiding all my flaws. He read my early poetry and stories, and he encouraged me. He taught me that a budding writer could type with five fingers instead of two. He gave me small jobs, keeping books here or there, and later I worked with him for two years at a state agency. It was the jobs and the care he gave me that saw me through my undergraduate years.

What's a great teacher? One who cares. T. J. cared. He was more than a teacher to me. He was a father. That's what a great teacher is—one who dares to care for us and bring us along when our bodies and souls have been broken and life seems too difficult to bear. T. J. saw the potential in me, and he helped me see that potential. He was a mentor, a guide and a benefactor, and I loved that man.

2

Actor

## *EDWARD ASNER*

I remember the effect Miss Louise Timmer of Wyandotte High in Kansas City, Kansas, had upon me. Her influence came in a more roundabout way. In my freshman and sophomore years (this is in the early 1940s), being cowed by the new and large milieu I found myself in, I resorted to being something of a class clown . . . whatever class it was, I was its clown. And, in turn, that clownship was used by others to the fullest extent possible—such as their hiding my books, knowing that in my search for them I would disrupt the class as much as possible.

Invariably, my noisy perambulating would begin before class but extend into class time as well. And, invariably, I was caught by Miss Timmer, who looked askance at me and my peregrinations, inquiring of me in proper English but meaning, of course, "what the hell are you doing?" And I would invariably respond with the paranoid quest I was on. She invariably felt the necessity of meting out punishment and, in her case, it was always the requirement of memorizing and reciting a poem.

I found myself constantly employed in this endeavor—"The Wreck of the Hesperus" being one I remember, and also "Abou Ben Adhem," of course. There are other longer ones, more complicated ones whose titles I can't recall . . . but I found myself looking forward to punishment from Miss Timmer, almost as a pleasure (it must have been an early example of my masochism)—to such an extent that I came to relish the reciting of poems and to relish the approbation that emerged from her great reserve.

Years later, I came to realize that the tasks and my easy mastery of them were probably one of the first times I displayed my facility with lines and my great enjoyment of working with them. Particularly in front of a group of my peers.

The woman had character, and by her demonstration of character and strength and her unwavering discipline of me, in turn began to add elements of my own strength and character and certainly pride—which was sorely lacking at that time. That was a transition period for me, in high school. I can safely say that, by the end of it, the clown in me had been "put on hold" until I could control it for better and more remunerative occasions.

In addition to all this I have supplied, I hasten to note that Miss

Timmer was an excellent teacher, taking great pride in her craft and in her subject. The love shone through, the pride was evident, and I think she instilled in all of us esteem for our mother tongue, and appreciation for its intricacy and beauty.

I'm delighted to say that, in returning to Wyandotte for class reunions in years to come, Miss Timmer came to be regarded as one of the stars of that school. Longevity must be one of the rewards, because she certainly has achieved that. I'm honored to have known her.

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Journalist

## *WILLIAM ATTWOOD*

Nearly fifty years ago, one man—one teacher—profoundly influenced the course of my life by persuading me that I was a better writer than I thought. He did it by setting high standards and being unsparing in his criticism, frugal with his praise, occasionally provocative but always quietly sympathetic. His students knew he cared about their work.

His name was Dudley Fitts. He was a poet and English teacher at the Choate School in Wallingford, Connecticut. I was a senior in his class during the 1936–37 school year, an experience which led me into a lifetime career of reporting, writing, and editing.

Fitts got our attention early in the course by walking into the classroom one day, sitting down, reading T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" aloud from start to finish and then leaving without saying another word.

I didn't care then for poetry or "literature" but certain passages in the poem induced me to look it up and also other works by Eliot. And this led to further outside reading.

Meanwhile, I turned in my regular weekly themes effortlessly; I had always been a facile but careless writer. And then Fitts hit me with a couple of flunking grades mitigated only by comments that I could do better if I tried. On one paper he wrote: "Some day you will understand what I mean when I say that some day you will be ashamed of this piece of writing." On another he simply scrawled, *Ah, jeunesse!* under the C minus.

So I got mad and began trying harder. A humorous sketch earned a B plus and the dry comment, "All right—I laughed." Then, in

early spring, one essay came back with the notation, "It's about time" over an A plus, circled in red.

Fitts is dead now, but remembered, I suspect, by many of us who were exposed to his teaching. Why? Because he let us know, in his quiet, almost nonchalant way that he would never be satisfied with anything less than our very best efforts; and somehow, we just didn't feel we could let him down. It was as simple as that.

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Novelist

## *LOUIS AUCHINCLOSS*

Malcolm Strachan *lived* in literature when he read it. Never have I met a person who more perfectly proved the point that every piece of writing is essentially a partnership between author and reader—and an equal partnership at that. Because the perfect reader is harder to find than the perfect author, there is a wide tendency to discredit the role of the former, or to confuse it with that of critic. The critic is something else altogether. Malcolm was not a critic. So far as I know, he never published anything. But it always seemed to me that he had reached a state of communication with the writer that was beyond articulation, or one that made articulation seem unneeded. Most, perhaps all, critics tend to be thinking as they read: "What am I going to say about this?" It may be a small mote in the eye, but it is still a mote. Malcolm had no such defect, which helped him to be a great teacher of boys, for he was able to convey a basic enthusiasm which was worth a hundred ideas.

Malcolm perfectly understood that reading with me had been almost lost as a pleasure. He saw that it had been channeled, along with everything else in my life, into the muddy stream of mere distinction seeking. But he was never so clumsy as to say so. He simply took pains to show me alternatives. He did not really succeed, at least while I was at Groton, for I was too fixed in my obsession. But he presented the model of a different life, and I was not so benighted that I failed to perceive the high quality of it. I was wise enough to attach myself to him as closely as one could to a master. He came to visit my family in vacations, and I was pleased and proud when I found how quickly my mother appreciated him, but ultimately jealous when she monopolized him. People were always having this experience with Malcolm. They would think,

because he was shy and unpushing, that they might have him all to themselves. Actually, he shone like a diamond in a junk pile. Everyone wanted him.

(From *A Writer's Capital*, University of Minnesota Press, 1974.)

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Humorist

## *ERMA BOMBECK*

Her name was Rosamund Moak, and she was feared by all. She taught English in a vocational school where auto mechanics, nursing, and retailing had precedence over the written word. She was rigid; she was tough; her teeth didn't fit. But when we got out of her class, we could communicate on every level.

To say that Mrs. Moak had an impact on my life would be the understatement of the century. First of all, she taught the importance of the English language. I was lucky. I went on to make a career out of it. But even for those who did not, she was a viable influence.

I would hope that there are a lot of Rosamund Moaks around today whose students fear going into their classes, but who emerge a year later with a feeling of pride for having learned what it's all about.

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Teacher, Critic

## *WAYNE BOOTH*

My most influential teacher in early high school was a chemist, and I therefore decided, after my sophomore year, to be one myself. "English" was for me largely a bore.

Then in Junior English I met Miss Jean Clark, in her first year of teaching after taking her degree—can it have been only the B.A.?—from Brigham Young University. Miss Clark was not, I suppose, a

"good teacher" by most standards. I think she had no special methods for interesting bored students. Her discipline was poor. But she did have one quality that still shimmers after forty-nine years: a mind engaged with literature and ideas. She was a voracious reader, and she brought her own books to class (*Anthony Adverse, Huckleberry Finn,* H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*) and insisted that we borrow them and talk about them afterward.

When we discussed works in class, she always discovered something important that I had missed. We would have heated arguments about our interpretations of novels and short stories ("Just how wicked *is* Silas Marner?"). But we had as much fun arguing about the latest pop-science or the form of newspaper ads: should "Chipmans Mercantile" read "Chipman's" or "Chipmans' " instead?

Toward spring, she put me in a glow by writing on an essay, "You are beginning to use your own head"—and I floated for weeks.

I have no idea how many in the class were bored while some of us were thus taught to care about "English." But I do know that for a few of us she had what we needed: a learning mind, eager to share what it was learning.

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Educator

## *ERNEST L. BOYER*

The first day of school, Miss Rice greeted twenty-eight frightened, eager children. I walked into the classroom, and there she stood, half-human, half-divine. (For months I just assumed that my first-grade teacher ascended into the clouds each evening and then descended every morning to teach the class.) Miss Rice spoke with quiet confidence and seemed to know what was in our heads before we spoke. There was a warmth, a radiance in the classroom that stirred feelings of both awe and inspiration. After a pause that seemed forever, Miss Rice broke the silence. "Good morning, class," she said. "Today, we learn to read."

No one said, "Hey, not today. Let's string beads." If Miss Rice said we learn to read, we learn to read!

Children start formal education with great anticipation. Going to school is a dramatically important rite of passage. It is the first time

they are on their own, ready to grow up, ready to perform heroic feats. Yet, all too frequently, high hopes drain away. Days drift by. There are few challenges to meet, no high expectations to be fulfilled. Excitement gives way to disappointment, then boredom.

But on this day, anticipation was intense. Miss Rice told us we would learn to read. All day we focused on four words. *I go to school.* We traced them, we sang them, and we recited them together. That afternoon, I ran home feeling ten feet tall. I whipped a crumpled piece of paper from my pocket and announced proudly to my mother. "Today, I learned to read." I had actually learned to memorize, of course, but on that first day of formal learning, Miss Rice taught me something profoundly important. She taught me that language is not just another subject; it is the means by which all other subjects are pursued.

Above all, Miss Rice conveyed a message. She taught me that excellence in education is measured not by a true-false test or by putting Xs on a piece of paper. Excellence, I learned, is measured by the mastery of language and by the ability of each student to communicate with care.

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Poet

## *GWENDOLYN BROOKS*

One of the empathetic and sensitive literature teachers at Woodrow Wilson College (now Kennedy-King) in Chicago in 1934-36 was Horace Williston, whom I have never forgotten. He loved American literature and encouraged a love for it in many newly awakened students.

Humorist

## *ART BUCHWALD*

The English teacher who stands out in my mind as the one who had the most impact on me was Mrs. Marie Egorkin, at P.S. 35 in Hollis, New York. I was the class clown and the student that drove every teacher up the wall. I was always making wisecracks in the class and disrupting the room. The only thing that saved me was that I wrote original compositions and poems. Mrs. Egorkin saw that behind my desire to get laughs, I had some talent. She encouraged it and went so far as to give me an opportunity to perform in front of the class in exchange for shutting up when she was trying to teach grammar. I also went for her lunch every day: chicken salad on white bread, no mayonnaise.

The nice thing about this relationship was, not only did Mrs. Egorkin steer me into wanting to become a writer, but we kept up our relationship long after I left public school. We corresponded when I was in the Marine Corps and continued when I launched my professional career. She seemed to be very proud of me and I in turn was eternally grateful that she took me seriously. It's amazing how one person can affect somebody's life when that somebody is young.

So if any teachers are reading this, be kind to the class clown. He or she might wind up being a highly paid humorist.

Poet, Novelist

## *BARNEY BUSH*

"Dalog lay crosstacreek."

"Backwoods, my dear boy, backwoods. You cannot speak or write this way unless you have published a book."

Fall, 1959. Harrisburg Township High School, southern Illinois. Humid summer lingered in shellacked walls, oak trim, oak furnishings. Centered in front of her desk alphabetically between Bensavage and Collins, I scratched my legs until they bled. My sun-darkened face and hefty thirteen years' frame strained, winced at

terms foreign to my ears: dangling modifier, object of the preposition, gerund, participial phrase, sentence diagramming.

Fortunately for me, she had taught Ute Indian students in Colorado and multitudes of backwoods people in the Ozarks of southern Illinois. My cultural background paralleled the lack of formal education in both groups. In fact, Miss Patterson—she has never married—was known behind handcovered whispers as "Old Squawface." She was not Indian, but her face bore the weathered stereotype of the ancient Indian matriarch. Since she was born in October, 1888, she was well over seventy when I was her student. She had taught English to my mother as well. My mother struggled with me, tears and all, to help me make sense of English perceptions. The whole school was extrinsic to me and many times I envisioned retreats to the familiarity of remote wilderness areas . . . never to return.

Miss Patterson saw in me what may have been one of the supreme tests of her professional calling. Besides a full hour of first-period grammar, she insisted on my presence during activity periods and what remained of lunch hour after eating. More than memorizing rules of speech, she caused me to want to open the door for myself . . . to use English as a means for verbalizing the native images inside me. Not until later at the University of Idaho was I to be in the presence of such commitment.

In second-semester literature, she was just as effective. She brought the alien world of *Great Expectations* to life and connected the worlds of Wordsworth and Coleridge with my own. As a human being she was approachable except for disruptive nonsense. Her stern demeanor humbled those four times her modest size.

At the Methodist Retirement Home in Lawrenceville, Illinois, Miss Patterson still reads and practices the spelling of words. She is extremely hard of hearing and often confused. I wonder if she could understand that in my books, and poems in hundreds of publications, her tutelage is not only in English versions but translated into more than a dozen other languages around the world? And that the characters in my stories can safely say, "Lay dalog crosstacreek"?

(Thanks to author Gary DeNeal—another former student of Miss Patterson—and to Connie White and Joyce Brunson at the Methodist Retirement Home for their biographical assistance.)

President of the United States

## *JIMMY CARTER*

My life was heavily influenced by our school superintendent, Miss Julia Coleman, who encouraged me to learn about music, art, and especially, literature.

As a schoolboy who lived in an isolated farm community, my exposure to classical literature, art, and music was insured by this superlative teacher. She prescribed my reading list and gave me a silver star for every five books and a gold star for ten book reports.

Miss Julia remains alive in my memory. She was short and somewhat crippled, yet she was quite graceful as she moved along. Her face was expressive, particularly when she was reading one of the poems she loved, or presenting to a class the paintings of Millet, Gainsborough, Whistler, or Sir Joshua Reynolds.

When I was about twelve years old, she called me in and stated that she was ready for me to read *War and Peace*. I was happy with the title because I thought that finally Miss Julia had chosen for me a book about cowboys and Indians. I was appalled when I checked the book out of the library because it was about 1,400 pages long, written by the Russian novelist Tolstoy, and of course not about cowboys at all. It turned out to be one of my favorite books, and I have read it two or three times since then.

(From *Why Not the Best?*, Broadman Press: Nashville, Tenn., 1975.)

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Mayor of San Antonio

## *HENRY G. CISNEROS*

I was scared and a little nonplussed.

Brother Martin McMurtrey, a tall, fortyish Marianist at Central Catholic High, had complicated my high school existence. He had placed me in his advanced sophomore English class. "My goal is for you to write and speak like a college student," he said.

I was a lanky fourteen-year-old, more at home with airplanes and sports than with the challenge of college-caliber writing. Quoting the specifications for an F-102 jet fighter came easy, but Shakespeare and puzzling short stories were foreign territory. Luckily, I loved to read.

The first semester was frustrating. Hamlet's indecision was perplexing. So were the 500-word essays returned with long commentaries in red ink. Brother McMurtrey kept pushing; his goals were uncompromisingly high. Today, I remember most his gift of time, his disciplined patience, his watchful encouragement.

High goals and my own frustrations were like a first-stage cocoon. After I had cast off one layer, I found more subtleties, more shades of perception in the written word.

If, in rare moments of adult leisure, I returned to these works—the sentences of Hemingway, Wolfe, Fitzgerald, and Conrad—I found some guidance. Sailing up the Congo in *The Heart of Darkness* is not that foreign to the daily rigors of public policy and urban politics.

Brother McMurtrey made one other contribution to my future. As chair of the English Department, he initiated a mandatory speech program. It propelled squirming, embarrassed boys into the terrors of impromptu speaking. By one's senior year, there was confidence and poise.

He also published *Anthology*, a yearly collection of good student writing. It gave us an audience. It also gave us incentive. I remember well my hesitancy at approaching Room 201 to submit my poem, written in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination. It was published.

More than twenty years later, Brother Martin McMurtrey is sixty-four years old. He still teaches a full load at Central. He also volunteers as an English teacher for classes of immigrants. I have become the mayor of his city—the product of my parents' dedication to family values, an ethic of work, and the encouragement of a selfless Brother who taught me that language always carries its own sense of wonder.

Occasionally, I catch glimpses of Brother McMurtrey's purposeful stride in my City of San Antonio. The fear I once felt is gone—replaced instead by an enormous sense of indebtedness. *Fiat lux*, teacher.

Poet

## *LUCILLE CLIFTON*

I celebrate the great poet and teacher Sterling Brown of Washington, D.C. I entered Howard University in 1953, a scholarship student from Buffalo, New York. So many buildings, so many people, so many of them black! I felt overwhelmed; how could I ever hope to compete in such an arena! I was the first member of my family to graduate from high school, but even a "smart girl" was over her head in such a place. Then, Sterling Brown with his great smile, his warm acceptance, his belief in each student's infinite possibility, his knowledge and love of the cultural heritage of black people and his eagerness to share it with us! He taught me much, not the least to "celebrate myself, and sing myself." He was and is a great teacher, a great poet, and a great man.

Novelist

## *PAT CONROY*

It was my happy destiny never to have encountered a sorry English teacher. But J. Eugene Norris reigns as the prince of language in those ecstatic realms where young boys and girls are sent to the rooms of perfect strangers to rediscover the secrets of fire. I sprang alive in the world under his gentle urging. He made me feel special. It was the first time I had ever felt truly loved by a teacher in a classroom, and it did not bother me at all that every other boy and girl in the room felt the same way. I sat next to Randy Randel, and he and I teased Gene every single day of that wonderful year until Randy fell dead while pitching the first baseball game of the year in front of us all. The following day, Gene Norris had to teach his English class about death and dying young. He gave a stunned and grieving class a day of beauty and meditation. It was during that hour I realized I had not only found a great teacher, I had also stumbled upon a great man.

On my sixteenth birthday, Gene gave me a copy of *Look Homeward, Angel* and told me he thought I was ready to enjoy the

many pleasures of Thomas Wolfe. I was ready for those pleasures indeed. For many years I could have been sued by the estate of Thomas Wolfe for plagiarism. I regretted bitterly that my father was only a fighter pilot and not engaged in some vocation as interesting as a stonecutter's. I gussied up my prose style with hundreds of intemperate, ill-used adjectives and felt that I was a fine boy. It was in Gene Norris's room that I learned for the first time that I was a writer. J. Eugene Norris told me so and said there was no doubt about it.

The following summer Gene drove me to Asheville, North Carolina, to visit the home in which Thomas Wolfe had grown up and written about in *Look Homeward, Angel*. In the backyard of the house, Gene showed me an apple tree and said, "Thomas Wolfe used to pick apples off this tree when he was your age." I picked one of the apples and ate it; Gene Norris had taught me the clear relationship between life and art.

He worried about the effect of Wolfe on my style and taught me that the flaw in my writing was a tendency toward overwriting and exaggeration. He was right, of course, but I do not exaggerate when I tell you that I had been waiting my whole life to walk into his classroom. I knew then and I know now that I was in the presence of the most wonderful and loving man who ever taught the English language in the Carolina low-country. I had the happy privilege of recognizing greatness when it was set like a feast before me. I was not wrong about Gene Norris. He was my friend when I left his classroom and he is a far greater friend today. He was a member of my wedding party and the first to call when he heard my mother had died of cancer. I could not talk when Gene called that night, but I listened as he praised my mother's life and again, Gene, old English teacher, turned something terrible into a moment of meditation and beauty.

In my novel *The Great Santini*, I wrote a whole chapter about Gene, calling him Ogden Loring. The chapter had nothing to do with the book, but on occasion, I like to find ways to remind Gene how much I love him and how delighted I am that he found me as a boy. I like to thank him from the heart and tell him that I simply don't know what I would have done without him.

Journalist

## *NORMAN COUSINS*

Her name was Sarah Augusta Taintor. Her main claim to fame, I suppose, was as the author of the *Secretary's Handbook*, a standard in the field for a half century. To me, however, she was the faculty advisor to the *Square Deal*, the school newspaper of Theodore Roosevelt High School in New York City.

Miss Taintor surprised me by appointing me editor of the school paper in my sophomore year. For almost three years I edited the *Square Deal*, learning about the various aspects of magazine journalism—copyediting, typography, and working with writers, printers, engravers. I even learned how to set type. And all the while, Sarah Taintor was encouraging me, helping me to grow, teaching me to respect the language and to understand the reasons for its rules. At my request, she arranged for me to take her English classes, where the world of literature and fine writing was spread open before me. She was in love with books and it was catching.

Many years later—it could have been twenty-five years or more—when I was on the *Saturday Review*, I took a sentimental journey to see her in upstate New York, where she lived in retirement with her sister. She was in her early nineties and almost deaf. Somehow she heard the rapping on the door. She looked at me wide-eyed for a minute or so, saying nothing, then threw her arms around me and held me close for a long time, still saying nothing. Then she took me by the hand and brought me in to see her sister. Still holding me by the hand, she took me into her study and showed me the bound volumes of the *Saturday Review*. Then her sister showed me the scrapbooks Sarah had kept about me.

I stayed for dinner, the two sisters fussing over me as though I was a long-lost child. We spoke about many things—the days at the *Square Deal*, her English classes, books we had read during the intervening years. It came time to go. She held me a long time, even longer than when I had arrived. I think we both knew we would probably never see each other again. Less than a year later she died; her sister followed within a few weeks.

Sarah Taintor was a force in my life, as I was careful to tell her on that wonderful fall day in upstate New York.

Novelist

## *PETER DE VRIES*

John De Boer was hardly "unheralded," considering his impact on his own profession and on the civic life around him. His influence on me was profound and permanent. He was a thrilling teacher and became a loyal friend. He was my first high school English teacher, and ours was one of his first classes, as he was almost as freshly out of college as we were into high school. That was the Chicago Christian High, occupying the second floor of a commercial building on the corner of 69th and South May Streets.

It was a parochial school founded and operated under the auspices of the city's Dutch Christian Reformed churches, representing a rather repressive Calvinist environment against which it was easy to rebel. John D., as we affectionately called him, understood and in large measure shared the insurrectionary bent many of us had, but at the same time we in turn caught something of the love he bore for our Dutch heritage, and he was thus able to guide our natural skepticism into healthy "social protest" channels, such as the political reform movement into which we zestfully threw ourselves in the course of one Chicago mayoral election. It all made us kindred spirits, so that I was perhaps more responsive than many of my peers to his dazzling mind, his richly humanitarian spirit, and his deep love of the literature he taught. His memory and influence remain abiding elements in whatever worth and substance I may myself possess as a member of the human race. Since he became at one point an officer of the National Council of Teachers of English and an editor of *The English Journal* and the editor of *Elementary English,* this is a particularly fitting place to pay him my deeply felt tribute.

Poet

## *RICHARD EBERHART*

People often ask me how I came to be a poet. I tell them the following story, aware that poetry has mysteries in general and is elusive in the following particulars. When I was fifteen or thereabouts in the Austin High School, Austin, Minnesota, our English teacher asked the class to write a poem and bring it in the next day. She must have given us some rudimentary principles about the subject.

I went home to the family library in Burr Oaks, the large house on forty acres my father had built in 1916, and discovered Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the only poet in our library. I became immediately enamored of the musicality of his verse and the perfection of his rhymes. I fell in love with poetry at that moment. It was as exciting as running the hundred-yard dash, which I once did in ten seconds flat a bit later on. It was total absorption, like living at the pitch that is near madness, to quote one of my lines written years later. I had boundless enthusiasm in the discovery of the joy of writing lines in verse and inventing rhymes. I had not lived long enough to have original ideas, but I reveled in imitating Tennyson.

Instead of one poem, the next day I brought in perhaps half a dozen. The class studied the writing of poetry for a week or two. Every other student brought in one poem each day. I always brought in several.

From this startling beginning I have been writing poetry ever since, it now being about sixty-five years later. I don't know whether I began at fifteen or sixteen.

I must owe my career to this high school teacher. Who could determine whether I would have written poetry anyway with some other kind of later motivation?

Upon receiving your invitation to honor unheralded teachers who helped shape the minds of students who later became known to the nation, I thought with affection of my old high school teacher (then, of course, not old at all) and wrote to the principal of the Austin High School, now a large edifice instead of my boyhood's red brick one, for her name and history.

I began by saying that there are mysteries about poetry. Imagine my surprise when the principal replied, after research, that in those days in the early twenties they kept the titles of the classes taught

but not the names of the teachers. He discovered the names of several elderly people who might know who she was and would try for knowledge from them, but as yet I have not heard of any discovery.

My high school English teacher is elusive in another way. I recall about fifteen years ago being asked to come to a house in Hanover, where there would be somebody who knew me in high school. My wife and I went to the house on Rip Road, but I cannot recall whether my actual teacher was there. I went again this year to that house. A sign in front said "Sold." She is elusive still, in long retrospect the loved teacher who inspired me to write poetry when I was fifteen or sixteen in the Austin public high school. It was probably this admired teacher who is responsible for the first poem I published, entitled "The Shell Vase" in *The Austinian* at the end of my senior year.

She may have followed my work through decades thereafter, but I will never know. It is a mystery-keeping kind of pleasure to pay homage to her now, this very long time later. If she is solely responsible, no words could tell how much I owe her. No, all the words I have written could tell her.

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President, National Education Association

## *MARY HATWOOD FUTRELL*

Of all the teachers who helped me in my formative years, I particularly remember Miss Jordan.

She wasn't a particularly "attractive" person, as "attraction" is so often—and so wrongly—measured these days. I can still see her . . . tall and thin, her long, plain-looking face framed by her gray hair, severely pulled back.

Miss Jordan taught English to me in eleventh grade at Dunbar High School in Lynchburg, Virginia. She was strict, all right. But she was also very caring, and that caring transcended her strict manner. She drilled and drilled and drilled us on how to diagram sentences.

"Now, Mary," I can recall her saying, "What is the object of the verb? What is the indirect object? Where are you going to place the adjective? Why?"

But Miss Jordan went far beyond drills. She also opened doors to different—and wider—worlds.

I was a "talker," and one day my talking was too much for Miss Jordan. She made me stay after school and write an essay on education and American enterprise. As a skinny, bony little kid in quiet, conservative Lynchburg, I had never thought about education and American enterprise.

I completed the essay—but not before I had rewritten it five times!

First, Miss Jordan didn't approve of the order of my ideas and their paragraphing. Then she said there were grammatical errors. Next, she pointed out misspelled words. And after that she said the essay had faulty structure.

Finally, after I corrected all those mistakes, Miss Jordan said my essay wasn't neat enough! Oh, was I angry! I couldn't understand why she hadn't told me about all my mistakes at one time.

Over the years, I came to realize that Miss Jordan was teaching me more than essay-writing. She was teaching me a lesson about life—that life is a series of small steps, each essential to achieving a larger goal.

And with that essay, I did reach a larger goal. Unbeknownst to me, Miss Jordan submitted my essay to some sort of citywide essay contest, and it actually won a prize.

As I look back today, I know it was Miss Jordan who helped me understand why I should go to college, and what I would be missing if I did not continue my education.

Each of us, if we're fortunate, has our own Miss Jordan—a teacher who, with knowledge, understanding, and compassion, shapes our lives and values and gives us a vision of the best that life can offer.

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Poet

## *NIKKI GIOVANNI*

Probably it's only fair to credit my mother with my love of reading. She's a dreamer—always talking about faraway places to visit, deeply intrigued by scents and sounds of everything from mythological Greece to the Casbah to ancient Rome to romances in the English countryside. At great sacrifice, as I now know, she purchased *The How and Why Books*, which she, my sister and I pored over, learning "Boats sail on the river/ships sail on the seas/But the

clouds that sail across the skies/are prettier far than these." I don't remember who wrote "Bridges," but Robert Louis Stevenson penned "Green leaves afloating/Castles on the foam/Boats of mine go boating/Where will all come home." Mommy has a wanderlust, and, though she taught many a third grader to read during her five years at St. Simon's School, she taught me to dream.

I don't remember when I first saw Alfredda Delaney. The summer of my tenth grade I went to live with my grandmother in Knoxville, Tennessee, and despite warnings to avoid her ("Miss Delaney is *hard*") I was enrolled in her English class.

Miss Delaney was and is a gentlewoman with a soft but firm voice. During the first quarter we were on grammar, which bored me. Somehow, perhaps because I was half-asleep, perhaps because I stared out the window, but most likely because I brought books to read during class, she excused me from sentences and paragraphs to let me do book reports. Nancy Washington Pate, a former classmate, swears Miss Delaney would say with a frown, "Class, I want you dummies to diagram the following . . . ," then would turn to me smiling and say, "But you, Yolande, may. . . ." Of course, it's not true. Miss Delaney's manners were far too ingrained for that ever to have occurred. She did, however, let me read everything from Rousseau to Nietzsche to Daphne Du Maurier. Class to trash. She was my introduction to Plato, and I also read Alfred North Whitehead and a beginning guide to Einstein. We read everything from *Leaves of Grass* (which had to be borrowed from the white library as the Negro library did not have a copy) to *The Well of Loneliness* to *Gone with the Wind*. If she were teaching today, I'm sure someone would object in PTA meetings to our choices.

But mostly Miss Delaney let me disrupt her life. I was one of those "good" students who skipped classes I hated, and she'd let me sit with her during her free time. I know she should have made me go to class, but I'm so happy she didn't. According to modern theory she also should have made lesson plans and made me stick to them; but she didn't. What she did was to introduce me to Edna St. Vincent Millay ("I burn my candle at both ends") with a fire in her heart. She frequently accused me of arguing for the sake of arguing—yet she argued back.

I'm fortunate to have been allowed to love Miss Delaney, to count her among my friends. She's retired, much to the loss for Knoxville public schools, but her community commitments and her deep love for her church allow her teaching to continue. Of the thirteen books I've written, I've never dedicated one to Miss Delaney because it seems so obvious I've dedicated my life to making her proud. She once said to me, "Well, Yolande, what *do* you want to do?"

Novelist

## *WILLIAM GOLDMAN*

I'm aware that most students have trouble dealing with high school, but I was a world class failure. I stumbled along, miserable, unable to do anything that I was proud of or pleased with. My marks were mostly low Cs.

We were graded at Highland Park High School every six weeks, and in my junior year, Mr. Hamill, my English teacher, gave me an A. It was my first since eighth grade. He ran a study hall I was in and I remember walking up to him and saying, "You gave me an A—I got an A for my last six-week period." He looked at me for a long moment before saying, "Yes, Goldman." "You really meant it then? It's not a mistake or anything?" "No, Goldman, it's not a mistake." "I just wanted to be sure," I told him and, stunned, went back to my desk to study.

That was, I suspect, when Mr. Hamill first took notice of me and my overpowering nerdlike qualities. I used to sit after school with him sometimes and chat, and once he said, "Goldman, why don't you try something: Pick out a classmate of yours, a leader, the one you most admire, and see if he's nervous about anything."

The captain of the football team was in several of my classes. I kept tabs on him for a few days and to my astonishment discovered that he was nervous about *everything*. His palms were constantly sweating, and he was forever drying them on his pants whenever he was asked anything in class.

It was a marvelous realization for me—I was not alone. Mr. Hamill had led me to a truth: *It isn't easy for anybody*. I hadn't quite realized that till then.

Several teachers altered my life. Mr. Hamill was the only one who taught me English. And none of the others had a more profound influence. I wish I'd told him then. I didn't. But wherever he is, whatever world he presently inhabits, I'm telling him now.

Novelist

## *ELOISE GREENFIELD*

Most of my memories of the semester I spent in her class are vague now. It was Cardozo High School, Washington, D.C., in the mid-1940s. Eleventh grade, or was it twelfth? I think I remember that she never gushed, that she liked us in a way that was matter-of-fact and dryly humorous. But I'm not sure. What I remember clearly, though, is a writing assignment she gave us—an autobiography that would include photographs and other momentos.

I had never liked to write. I loved to read, and spelling and grammar were my strong suits. But except with close friends, I kept most of my feelings to myself, so that finding enough words to fill the page a teacher might request without revealing my *self* was always a slow process. Trying to say something while saying nothing was hard work.

Paradoxically, it was a personal account—the autobiography—that awakened my love for writing. I didn't forget to hide, but there were so many things that could be revealed—incidents and facts—that the words flowed, and I was caught up in the excitement of moving words around on paper. I pasted the handwritten pages in a large black scrapbook, along with old snapshots and old report cards. Mrs. Hill gave me a grade of B + and I was proud.

As far as I can remember, although I had other wonderful English teachers, that autobiography was my one and only enjoyable experience with writing until I became an adult. And then, at first, I thought that my interest in writing had come out of the blue. But later, looking back, I would remember my autobiography and Mrs. Hilda A. Hill, and be grateful for her contribution to one of the most joyful aspects of my life.

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Poet

## *JOY HARJO*

I was sent to Father John Staudenmaier the second semester of my combined junior/senior year of high school at the Institute of American Indian Arts, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I had been skipped through all of my English classes. They didn't know quite what to do with me and had decided to let me work independently with the new visiting teacher. He was busy with another class at the same time, but he patiently set me up in my own room and let me choose what I would do. He made it quietly clear that he had high expectations for me.

I loved to read, and would read nearly anything. I had always loved the sound of language and can remember the time and place as a child where I first heard certain words, and it had been magic. But I had lost that magic. I was directionless, and at sixteen was already a ghost of a child who looked older than I do now at thirty-four years of age. I was precocious, yet not sure of anything in my life. I was suffering from an intense lack of self-worth, even self-hatred, a very common problem with most Indian students.

Father John could have given me stale assignments, left me alone, or passed me on to someone else, but he saw more in me than I could have seen that moment in my life. He let me read what I chose, but questioned me about what I was reading in a manner that made me more observant of the world and my choices. He made me aware that I had a choice. He talked with me as one human being to another, and jarred that place of embryonic wisdom in me.

I remember clearly one slow spring afternoon in his upstairs office in a dusty adobe building. There was the soft murmur of students in his other class. He had given them an assignment to work on at their desks. He brought me into his office and pulled out a stack of photographs. He asked me to look very closely at the first one, and he began to tell a story about each person in the photograph, based on the cues he received from body language, facial expressions, and where that person stood in the framing. I was intrigued. He handed the next one to me and made me tell the story, interpret the characters' dreams, their futures. This was a breakthrough for me. At first I thought I couldn't do it, for I couldn't even see myself enough to draw a self-portrait in my art classes. All

that would ever appear on my drawing board was long black hair and behind that someone who was not telling. But now, I could begin to see behind the gesturing, behind the skin. And I could tell the story, and could begin to tell my own in a different way.

This was one incident of many that I can recall. Of course, all these realizations didn't come together until I had grown some years and had made the choice in my life to become a poet. Father John's presence has always remained benevolent and clear in my memory.

I want to thank him for seeing the possibility for language and observation in the slim soul of a child who ran the grounds of the Indian school in winter in sandals and navy wool jacket, so very silent and wordless.

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President, Notre Dame University

## *REV. THEODORE M. HESBURGH*

I attended a rather small parochial school, Most Holy Rosary, in Syracuse, New York. We were taught by the Immaculate Heart nuns of Scranton, Pennsylvania. They all had Master's degrees, at least, and were excellent teachers. I remember particularly Sister Veronica, who taught us third-year English. We had a very thick *Anthology of English Literature* which she really brought to life. Not only were we inspired to read avidly these English literature classics, but we were encouraged to do a good deal of writing, which she assiduously corrected.

Unfortunately, the high school has now closed and my dear teacher, Sister Veronica, is dead. However, I have managed to read several books a month ever since, and I think Sister Veronica gets the credit for that. I have also written a few million words, and I believe she deserves credit for that, too.

It is difficult to say how one person can make so much difference in your life, but I believe that all of those Sisters, and particularly Sister Veronica, pointed me in a direction that has brought me untold pleasure in reading great books and even some very hard hours of trying to write readable prose. The one point in which she failed was in getting me to write poetry. I have tried many times, but I just don't have the talent. However, I have written a number of books in prose and perhaps that will make up for my inability in poetry. At least I continue to read poetry with great pleasure.

Novelist

## *KRISTIN HUNTER*

The teacher who did the most to encourage me was, as it happens, my aunt.

She was Myrtle C. Manigault, the wife of my mother's brother Bill, when she taught me in second grade at all-black Sumner School in Camden, New Jersey. Now she is Mrs. Myrtle M. Stratton, retired and residing in Haddonfield, New Jersey.

During my childhood and youth, Aunt Myrtle encouraged me to develop every aspect of my potential, without regard for what was considered practical or possible for black females. I liked to sing; she listened to my voice and pronounced it good. I couldn't dance; she taught me the basic jitterbug steps. She took me to the theater—not just children's theater but adult comedies and dramas—and her faith that I could appreciate adult plays was not disappointed.

Aunt Myrtle also took down books from her extensive library and shared them with me. We had books at home, but they were all serious classics. Even as a child I had a strong bent toward humor, and I will never forget the joy of discovering Don Marquis's *Archy & Mehitabel* through her.

Most important, perhaps, Aunt Myrtle provided my first opportunity to write for publication. A writer herself for one of the black newspapers, the Philadelphia edition of the Pittsburgh *Courier*, she suggested my name to the editor as a "youth columnist." My column, begun at age fourteen, was supposed to cover teenage social activities—and it did—but it also gave me the latitude to write on many other subjects as well as the habit of gathering material, the discipline of meeting deadlines, and, after college graduation six years later, a solid portfolio of published material that carried my byline and was my passport to a series of writing jobs.

Today Aunt Myrtle, independently and through her organizations (she is a founding member of The Links, Inc.), is still an ardent booster of culture and of her "favorite niece." She reads omnivorously, attends writers' readings, persuades her clubs to support artists, and never lets me succumb to discouragement for very long. As I told her theater club recently, she is "as brilliant and beautiful and tough as a diamond." And, like a diamond, she has reflected a bright, multifaceted image of possibilities to every pupil who has crossed her path.

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Novelist

## *KARLA KUSKIN*

I began attending The Little Red School House on Bleecker Street in New York City when I was eight years old. In 1950 I graduated from Elizabeth Irwin High School. Two names for one school.

I remember all my teachers from those days: Mrs. Doughty, Marjorie Kneeland, William Marvin, Jerry Hellmuth, Harold Kirshner, Harold Tannenbaum are among them. They were an enthusiastic and exciting group of teachers who taught everything, making all subjects from poetry to ancient history relevant to our lives. I would like to applaud them all, but I think that the first three were more specifically "English teachers" than the others.

I was in "the tens" when I had Mrs. Doughty. I do not remember her first name but I know that I loved her. She was very short, just about our size, and she met us head on, both physically and intellectually. She made it clear that she took us seriously, appreciating our writings and the plays that we created as a class. We cavorted blithely through our own version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and grew familiar with the heroics and foibles of Greek gods and goddesses. Mrs. Doughty was kind and firm. Her warmth drew me in and her disappointment when my work was not up to snuff spurred me on.

Marjorie Kneeland taught us for our two years of junior high school. Her reputation preceded her. You only had to look at her to confirm the older kids' testimony that she was very strict . . . "You had to work hard for Kneeland." Her straight, thin form, tight, grey hairdo, and sharp features were not comforting. But then she would respond, explain, smile, and she did all those things very well. She made us respect language, find pleasure in the ways it is put together. She taught us to type and by doing so she gave a number of us a tool not just for typing but for writing. And she read poetry to us. A lot of it. One weekly assignment was to find a favorite and read it aloud in class. We sweated and practiced and read aloud, first to our best friends, as we learned to treasure and respect the individual music of each particular poem.

Mr. Marvin was our Engish teacher in the last years of high school. Two qualities necessary to a wonderful teacher burned within him. They were a love of his subject and the ability to communicate facts along with feelings. Part pedant, part actor, he

projected his excitement in *Hamlet* or "The Waste Land" so that it cut through the fog of our adolescence. With his thin hair falling onto his forehead and his glasses slipping down his nose, he delivered sermons that turned basketball players into devotees of Keats and Wallace Stevens. Those sermons were another step in molding many of us into committed and incurable readers. I am still continuing along that reader's path, as committed and incurable as ever. And I intend to continue on it as long as there's a little light to read by.

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Poet

## *NANCY LARRICK*

As I was entering tenth grade, a new teacher came to our small town to teach junior and senior English. In a matter of days, the verdict was in: "He's the best teacher we ever had." "He makes you work, but, boy, it's worth it." My two years in his class were certainly the greatest, the most memorable experience in a lifetime of education.

We knew we were lucky then. Now, almost sixty years later, I am back in the same small town with some of those "lucky" students—doctors, lawyers, industrialists, teachers—and I hear over and over: "Garland Quarles was the best teacher I ever had."

Then begins a recital of anecdotes cherished all these years: the time he read the witches' scene in *Macbeth* and sent prickles down our spines; the time he read Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and, picking up the yardstick, pointed dramatically to the blackboard and said, "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall/ Looking as if she were alive. . . ." (The scrabbly old blackboard was transformed, and we were transfixed.) Then there was the time he read "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" (Browning was a favorite of his): "I gallop'd, Dirck gallop'd, we gallop'd all three," and we admit that galloping rhythm is still surging through us.

It wasn't all literature and listening, however. We wrote and wrote and wrote, and every paper came back promptly with his precise comments pinpointing spots where improvement was needed. Invariably our adjectives were disappointing: too bland, too trite, too numerous. One day he made that point by bringing out

the unabridged dictionary and reading the definitions of *nice*, which was apparently our standby. I could swear he said there were twenty-three meanings of *nice*, including *bowlegged*, and others corroborate this recollection. When we looked it up ourselves, we didn't find *bowlegged*, but Mr. Quarles had made his point, and I don't think I have written that four-letter word again until this day.

Garland R. Quarles wrote beautifully himself—both poetry and prose. I think his success as a teacher grew out of his detailed familiarity with his subject, his own exquisite precision and flair with writing, and his unbridled enthusiasm for his subject. Even now I can recite the same stirring lines, feel the same rhythm of great poetry, and be carried away by the beauty of language as he introduced it to us so many years ago.

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Novelist

## *MADELEINE L'ENGLE*

The English teacher who made the most significant impact on my life was Margaret Clapp, during her first teaching job at Todhunter School in New York. I was in the sixth grade, and she was the first person in all of my school life to see any potential talent in this shy, introverted child.

I must have written hundreds of stories for her, and I will always be grateful. As you probably know, she went on to be President of Wellesley College. Margaret Clapp was interested enough in this young nonachiever to give me extra reading to do, extra writing assignments, and to give me, for the first time, faith in myself as a person and as someone who was going to be a writer. Since my fifth-grade teacher had put me down as "not very bright" and accused me of copying the poetry I wrote (it was my own), Miss Clapp's affirmation was all the more important. She was a vibrant example of the fact that one does not teach a subject, one teaches a child. I will never forget all that she taught me.

# *JAMES A. McPHERSON*

I am currently a Professor of English at the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop. I have studied with some of the best teachers in the country: Paul Fruend at Harvard Law School, Owen Fiss at Yale, Henry Nash Smith at Berkeley, the novelist Ralph Ellison. All of these men, and hundreds more, helped me to appreciate the importance of ideas. Yet, when I remember back to what was my basic inspiration, the faces of these men disappear and I think of one woman, a high school teacher, who first encouraged me to use my imagination. She may not even remember me.

Her name, then, was Miss Kay Frances Stripling. She was, when I was in tenth grade, a new English teacher at the Alfred E. Beach High School in Savannah, Georgia, my hometown. She had just finished college herself, and had brought a young teacher's passion for literature into our segregated public school. I think that because she was still very close to her own studies, and to her love of the English language, she could not be anything less than enthusiastic in her teaching. She was a very inspiring person.

I was very quiet and reserved, and did not like to talk. But I liked to read, and Miss Stripling liked to share her favorite books with us. In her class we read a great deal of English literature. After we had read *Beowulf* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, I dared to make up my own epic, borrowing Chaucer's sense of rhyme, and showed it to Miss Stripling. Because she understood my shyness, she read it to the class without mentioning who had written it. One day she read to us part of her favorite story, one by the French writer Guy de Maupassant called "Boule de Suite." The *feeling* in the story stayed with me because it was in her reading of it. The story was sentimental, but it was realistic in its depiction of pride and duty and hypocrisy and pain. I was, at the time, familiar enough with these traits of human character. I remember the story, I am now convinced, because of the way Miss Stripling read it into my life. She took from nineteenth-century French culture a story about war and prostitution and gave it, through her reading, an emotional context in a segregated black American world. Her casual redefinition, or re-contextualization, of the story taught me something very valuable about the integrative powers of the human imagination.

When I was in twelfth grade, I found a volume containing "Boule de Suite" in the used book section of a Salvation Army Store in Savannah. It was a leather-bound edition of de Maupassant's best stories. I read "Boule de Suite" in its entirety. I read it again and again. I still read it at least once a year. More than that, I have been trying, since my late teens, to write a story that is just as technically and emotionally perfect. I am still trying.

I thank Miss Stripling for her silent encouragement of my imagination. She helped me take my first step toward becoming a writer. She remains in my memory as a model of the transformational power that remains in the hands of teachers who love the subjects they teach. I have been in the classroom since 1969, and want to believe that I have touched a few students the way Miss Stripling once touched me.

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Poet

## *NAOMI LONG MADGETT*

Since I must have been born with a love of literature and composition, and since that natural interest was nurtured at home with the help of my father's extensive library, my mother's old "elocution" books, and my parents' good example, I cannot say that any one teacher of English inspired or encouraged me to a greater extent than any other. I had a number of excellent teachers along the way, and even the covert and overt racial prejudice which was a part of my early education could not dampen my enthusiasm for language.

It was at Virginia State College (now Virginia State University) that one professor, Felicia D. Anderson, not only satisfied my longing to share what I felt about great literature and provided me with a real communion of spirit but also gave me a philosophy that sustained me later through almost thirty years of teaching on the high school and college levels.

Professor Anderson had a style of her own; she occasionally wore ridiculously original clothing and would quiet the laughter that sometimes erupted from something humorous in a discussion by holding up her hand and quoting, "Absent thee from felicity awhile." Often the wealth which she offered seemed lost to

everyone in the class except me, and I felt alone in the classroom except for her magnetic and beautiful presence.

One day after class, when we were discussing some point that had been brought up, I asked, "Doesn't it discourage you that the gifts you have to give so often go unreceived by your students?" Without hesitation, she said, in her distinctive voice, "No. If, in one college generation, one student catches the vision, I am satisfied."

At the time, I thought, "How discouraging! What a small percentage!" What a thankless task good teaching must be if that is all a teacher can hope for!"

Years later, as I aspired to be as good a teacher as was "Felicia D.," her words and her wisdom inspired me to give the best of which I was capable to my students, regardless of how few seemed to "catch the vision." I came to realize that one life changed for the better because of me was worth a lifetime of effort. I realized, too, that no teacher can know what effect his or her efforts have upon what students. That effect may not *ever* be known to the teacher but may still be present, however dormant.

I feel good about my years of teaching, in spite of frequent discouragement, because Felicia D. Anderson taught me what good teaching and dedication to minds and values in the making are all about.

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Poet

## *HAKI R. MADHUBUTI*

There is something magical about people who have a passion for ideas. A part of the magic is that they are usually very serious persons with high standards and a definable purpose for living that is far beyond the ordinary. If such people are willing and able to share their love—and in doing so change others for the better—they need to be remembered. Hoyt W. Fuller lived ahead of his time and, as is often the case with visionaries, was impatient with mediocrity and ignorance. Yet, within the imperfections of growing up in America, he shared his music and mission with us to the end of his bright and influential life.

Hoyt Fuller's work influenced a generation of young scholars, activists, poets, teachers, writers, and thinkers. His voice, quiet and

consistent as editor of the important *Black World* (formerly *Negro Digest*) and *First World* magazines, introduced Afro-American and African literature and writers to an international audience. His book, *Journey to Africa*, set the tone for serious consideration and contemplation of that massive and complex continent. As a teacher (adjunct professor at Northwestern and Cornell) and editor, he brought clarity to the turbulent decades of the sixties and seventies. True to the music of his time, he was the melody rather than the rhythm. His voice was direct and served as a road map for millions. He detested confusion in thought or language.

The quality that impressed me the greatest about Mr. Fuller was the maturity and thoughtfulness of his responses. It seemed as though most of his answers were logical and consistent with his actions. He seldom spoke from the top of his head and was black—culturally, consciously and in color—before it was popular, and always in an instructive and non-dogmatic manner. There was a hard morality to his presence without the self-righteousness. He represented that which was decent, human, and right in this world. Mr. Fuller was a true lover of life and words. He travelled among many languages and cultures, and was an emotionally voracious reader of international literature.

The pronoun "I" seldom cluttered his lexicon, and his sense of *style* was in the league of Duke Ellington and Gwendolyn Brooks. He took on the bullies of the world, using carefully structured sentences that displayed educated urban metaphors and exemplified a serious mind at work. He exhibited preparedness and winning possibilities. His dedication to young writers and creators helped to launch hundreds of poets, essayists, playwrights, novelists, visual artists, photographers, and thinkers into the international arena. Hoyt Fuller was a cultural father to an entire generation of black word users. His uncompromising mind, his magic, and his music are missed. Few are able to sing his praise. I will try:

"compared to what" goes the song.
try example and originator.
try man of memory and legacy,
  man of destiny and future.
earthly visitor and runner among us,
suggesting words as model and form,
  language morally precise,
demanding literacy and enlightenment,
as the ingredients for
intelligence,
beauty,
wisdom.

Novelist

## *BERNARD MALAMUD*

Clara A. Molendyk was an unusual person: very well educated, interested in teaching, investing a good deal of intelligence and—when it comes to essences—concern and passion in her teaching. She was very fond of her students and made us feel expansive, free, and useful.

Clara was a Ph.D. who did a thesis on Charles Evans Hughes. She read a good deal and loaned us books freely. Her home was open to us and we went there often. To this day (I am seventy and she is seventy-six or -seven) I remember her father and mother, their interest in us, and the pleasure of their company.

It would make me happy if Clara Molendyk were to receive an award from the National Council of Teachers of English for awakening me to the pleasures of poetry and literature.

Novelist

## *SHARON BELL MATHIS*

In 1937, the year I was born, a young teacher graduated from Coppin Normal School in Maryland. She was Bertha Reed Lee McDonald—my beloved godmother.

My mother, Alice Frazier Bell, and her good friend Bertha made a pact when they were little girls growing up in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Each youngster promised to be godmother to the other's children. Bertha was never to be a biological mother. Alice gave birth to four children—one boy and three girls. The firstborn was Sharon, an infant who—if all the stories are to be believed—took to books right away.

Bertha kept her promise. She held me, hugged me, kissed me and sent presents. There was a delightful yellow sweater and a beige skirt with an inverted pleat. I spent marvelous summers in her home—writing the countless poems and stories she encouraged me to write (sometimes we were up until two o'clock in the morning). G'Mom, which was my name for her, seemed to enjoy the

awkward, self-centered poems that contained a preponderance of unlikely similes and metaphors. Tenderly, she nurtured my compulsion to write images on paper. She decided to allow me every opportunity to express myself—no matter how foolish the result.

When I graduated from St. Michael's Academy (high school) in New York City, I went immediately to live in G'Mom's home and to attend Morgan State College (now Morgan State University). I couldn't have been happier. At that time, Bertha Reed Lee McDonald was a fifth-grade demonstration teacher at P.S. 132 on Mount Street in Baltimore, Maryland. The two of us, whenever we could, wrote poems together and listened to one another's ideas. In 1961, several years after my graduation, my godmother wrote an original play, "Once upon a Lifetime," which was produced at Carver Vocational School in Baltimore.

My godmother is now retired from the Baltimore school system. She was, and still is, a gifted educator. She is one of my dearest friends, my own true-to-life fairy godmother. She draped me in a garment called love and placed me on a carriage strong enough to see me through whatever it was I had to face in life.

I thank almighty God for two little girls who made a pact and bound themselves to a promise (sealed with kisses on the faces of porcelain dolls). That moment was my beautiful mother's very first gift to me.

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Novelist

## *N. SCOTT MOMADAY*

Yvor Winters was hardly unheralded. He was, and he remains, a clearly visible figure in American literature. He was a distinguished poet and an able critic, and he was without equal as a teacher. Curiously, I did not know what a superior teacher he was until long after I attended his classes. He taught American literature, especially poetry, at Stanford University. I became his student in 1959, when I began my graduate work there, and I worked with him closely through my graduate career; we were the best of friends throughout the remainder of his life. He died in 1968.

In the classroom Mr. Winters was soft-spoken. There was nothing of the showman in him, nothing calculated for effect. He did not

command attention so much as he invited it. In a monotone, almost, he read a poem, leading you through it word by word, pause by pause, so that every syllable was acknowledged, every rhythm heard, every meaning gleaned. Then he commented upon it quietly. And when he finished, you were more often than not in possession of the poem. His extraordinary mind was never more alive than when it was in the immediate presence of a poem. He could perceive the structure of a poem by hearing it read. He was not afraid to make judgments, and he encouraged his students to make them. "This is a very great poem," he would say, or "This is among the four or five greatest poems in the language." He was entitled to make such claims; most people are not. Of this we were convinced absolutely.

The quality of inspiration he imparted to me has not diminished over the years. I took his teachings for granted at the time, but I do not take them for granted now. I have come to realize how central they are to my creative life. There are people, not many, who teach simply by the example of their moral and intellectual being, in whose company it is simply rewarding to be. Yvor Winters was one of these.

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Journalist

## *WILLIE MORRIS*

Our English teacher, Mrs. Parker, was the wife of the owner of the barber shop in Yazoo City, Mississippi. She had grown up in a small town in Arkansas, and had even spent some time in New York City before settling down in our little town on the edge of the Mississippi Delta.

In my first year in high school, 1949, she lectured us for three weeks on Anglo-Saxon England, and on the Normans, and then on Chaucer. She made us take notes, because that was the way it was done in college, and she said she wanted her students to go to college someday. She had us read *The Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Thackeray, Dickens, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning. Then she had us give reports on the books and poems we had read; woe to the unfortunate student who tried to memorize the outlines of one of the novels by reading it in Classic Comics.

She was unsparing in her criticism, and she got rougher as we moved into the higher grades. I must have parsed one hundred sentences on the blackboard of that room, trying to come to terms with gerundives, split infinitives, verb objects, and my own dangling participles. It was the one course in that school where great quantities of homework were essential: novels, poems, themes, grammar, spelling. She would give the assignment at the end of every class, and an awesome groan would fill the room. She would say, "Well, you want to learn, don't you? Or maybe you *want* to be saps all your life." She had little patience with the slow ones, or the ones who refused to work, but for those who tried, or performed with some natural intelligence, she was the most loyal and generous of souls. She would talk about their virtues to everyone in town who would listen, and sometimes take them home to have quail and dumplings with her and her husband and show them colored pictures of the Lake Country of England.

Among many of the students Mrs. Parker was a scorned woman. They bad-talked her behind her back and said that she worked people that hard out of plain cruelty. I myself sometimes joined in this talk, because it was fashionable. I fully appreciated her only when I went far away to college and made straight A's in English.

There must be many another small town in America with women like her—trying, for whatever reason, to teach small-town children the hard basics of the language, and something of the literature it had produced—unyielding in their standards, despairing of sloth and mediocrity, and incorruptible. Rarely have I encountered a fellow American writer who did not know someone like her.

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Journalist

## *EDWIN NEWMAN*

More than fifty years have gone by since I graduated from high school (in January 1935), and the teacher of English to whom I owe so much has long since died. He remains in my memory, a short, stocky, red-haired man, with a deep, resonant voice, rather a theatrical voice, really, and a twinkle in his eye. He was always neatly dressed, and I seem to recall that he wore stiff collars and a vest, always.

His name was Edwin A. Kane, and he taught at George Washington High School, which still stands on a height overlooking the Harlem River in upper Manhattan. One way he communicated his love of language was by joking, by punning, by letting us know how much pleasure the language offered to those who were willing to take it. His classes were, to a degree, performances, by him and by us. He made everyone in the class sing, solo. Some of the boys tried to get out of it by protesting that their voices were changing. I tried that. Mr. Kane was unmoved, as he was also by the embarrassed blushes on the faces of the girls as they took their turns, some of them squeaking so softly they could barely be heard.

What did we sing? We began with these sounds, emitted in response to movements of Mr. Kane's right hand: "Sing, lee, ah, oh, ooh." That may sound silly, but once you got it out, you realized that the worst was behind you and picked up confidence. Everyone in the class eventually sang this and—this was the title of the exercise—"Folk Songs of My Ancestors." This was not the self-conscious "ethnicity" we hear so much of nowadays. It made us realize the variety of backgrounds from which we came, and it certainly enlivened the class hours. In my own case, it gave me some confidence about speaking before an audience, a "live" audience, although the term was not in use in those days.

Mr. Kane was happy with the English language, and with the human voice. To him, they were a source of unending delight. That was the message that came across. I have never ceased to be grateful for it.

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President of the United States

## *RICHARD M. NIXON*

Learning to read, write, speak, and understand the English language should be the major objective of anyone who plans to go into public life. Winston Churchill is the classic example of the truth of this statement. His father thought he was a dullard because he received mediocre grades in math and science. But at a very early age, probably inspired by a good teacher, he fell in love with the English language and used it as a powerful weapon in the service of the cause of peace and freedom throughout the ninety years of his life.

In part because of the enormous impact of television, we don't read as much as we should today, despite the fact that ours is the best-educated generation in history. Proficiency in English, even among college graduates, is sometimes dismally low. I have found, for example, that very few lawyers can write a decent letter, very few politicians read books, and—again because of the pernicious influence of TV—the ability to conduct an intelligent conversation is virtually a lost art.

I was fortunate to have excellent English teachers during the time I attended public schools in California through the twelfth grade. I can recall even today my first-grade teacher in the Yorba Linda Grammar School; my eighth-grade English teacher at the East Whittier Grammar School; Dr. H. Lynn Sheller, who taught me sophomore English at Fullerton High School; and Miss Erna Fink, who taught me senior English at Whittier High School.

The one who influenced me the most was Dr. Albert Upton, a professor of English at Whittier College. He was a tough grader, sometimes abrasive, always fair. He was one of the pioneers in teaching what was then called basic English. He insisted that being able to write or speak in lean, muscular prose was preferable to showing off knowledge by using multi-syllablic words and complex sentence structures.

His greatest influence on me was that he inspired me to read books for pleasure. One summer he insisted that I become acquainted with Tolstoy. As a result I read *War and Peace, Anna Karenina,* and his minor novels, as well as some of the philosophical works he wrote in his later years.

From that time on, reading has been my favorite avocation. I prefer history, biography, and philosophy to novels but believe that even a mediocre book is better than a good television documentary. I am not a speed reader, and writing is an ordeal for me. But whatever success I have had in being able to communicate ideas to others I credit to the English teachers I had over the years, and particularly to Dr. Upton, for encouraging me in whatever spare time I had to read good books.

Any English teacher who inspires his or her pupils to follow this practice will have rendered the greatest possible service to them.

Attorney

## *LOUIS NIZER*

I remember Mr. Bishop (the first name *does* escape me), who taught geometry and trigonometry at Boys High in Brooklyn, New York. He was about forty-five years old, and bore no mark of distinction in his thin face. He was sallow, with deep, heavily lidded eyes, a short, roundish nose, and a slightly jutting chin. His voice was unresonant and inclined to fade off in a whisper. It had a matter-of-fact quality perfectly suited to the uncompromising logic of mathematics, as if, of course, the result was Q.E.D.—*quod erat demonstrandum*.

All of this should have made him the most forgettable character I ever knew. But no. When he taught, the unimpassioned lucidity of demonstrations created sheer beauty in the triangles and logarithms. He was continuously voted the most popular teacher in the school. Perhaps kindness had something to do with it. A pupil who failed to understand was led tactfully onto the right path, as if it was the most natural thing to have missed originally, and how bright he was to arrive at the corrected conclusion.

The writer who later influenced me most was Emerson. His elegance and grace of diction added verve and beauty to his thought. As Judge Benjamin Cardozo once observed, style cannot be separated from substance. An argument well phrased is more persuasive than the same argument prosaically phrased. Substance can titillate the mind, while style thrills it.

I refer to Emerson, because Bishop had the same quality in explaining figures which Emerson had in explaining thoughts. We felt a fire built under us by this quiet man's expositions. We could not be certain how the fire was lit. Was it skill with which the problem was dissected so that the solution seemed to burst upon us with the excitement of a mystery unraveled? Was it the purity of mathematical logic, the beauty of which caressed the mind? Was it Bishop's own dedication and concentration which set higher ideals for us than his instructions? Or was it that supreme gift of all great teachers, a fatherly concern for their pupils which accompanies the joy of teaching? Whatever the mystery of personality, there was no doubt about Bishop's achievements. At reunions for a half century—only one teacher was remembered affectionately. It was he.

(From *Reflections without Mirrors*)

## *FELIPE DE ORTEGO Y GASCA*

My trip to Pittsburgh during Thanksgiving of 1985 was a sad occasion (the death of my sister's husband), made sadder by a nostalgic side-trip to the University of Pittsburgh, where I had studied philosophy and comparative literature from 1948 to 1952.

Each time I saw my face and form reflected in a window or a plate-glass door in those high-vaulted Gothic corridors of the Cathedral of Learning, I was reminded of the thirty-seven years that had passed since I first set foot on the campus, fairly fresh from a World War II stint in the Marines. What a long road I had traveled in those thirty-seven years, a journey whose first steps started at Pitt with Abraham Lauf, my first creative writing teacher.

There were other teachers, of course, who influenced my intellectual and cognitive development, but "Abe" Lauf is the teacher I remember best and the one who had the most impact on my life as a writer. I'm sorry now I didn't stay in touch with him—and even sorrier I never told him how important he was in my life.

Well into the start of Professor Lauf's sophomore course on description and narration, I was despairing of earning anything better than a D on the assignments I was turning in. My papers fairly dripped of red ink that covered them with his critical remarks and comments. "He expects us to write like pro's," I thought. "That's not fair! He thinks he's still editor of *Redbook* or whatever magazine he worked at before the war. I'll confront him." After all, I had been a Marine Corps sergeant.

He listened to my complaint, nodded sympathetically (I thought), then, when I was through, said matter-of-factly, unintimidated by my presentation, "Perhaps you should drop the course, Mr. Ortego." That was it. He dismissed me with a challenge. That not only got my dander up, it also got my "Mexican" determination up.

Needless to say, I didn't drop the course. I worked harder. And the harder I worked, the more red ink poured from Professor Lauf's pen. About midway through the course, I got the hang of the craft. But that didn't stop the red ink. I learned that the better I wrote, the more he had to say. The more potential he thought you had, the more he expected from you. And he made us work to the full potential he thought each of us had.

I got a B from him that semester, and learned the "art of red ink," which has characterized my own teaching of writing. I took three more creative writing courses with Professor Lauf. In the meantime, I did well on the Pitt newspaper and had my first short story published in the student literary magazine.

After Pitt, I pursued a career as a teacher and writer, the latter with astonishing cumulative success, publishing poetry, fiction, and critical studies as well as placing pieces in national and international magazines and journals like *The Nation, Saturday Review, The Center Magazine,* and the *Chaucer Review*. But there is not one piece I've written over the years where Abraham Lauf has not been looking over my shoulder, nodding, pushing me to do better. More importantly, however, I learned from Abraham Lauf that when things get tough one stays the course; and that what is not fair is not working to the full measure of one's potential.

I've often wondered if Abraham Lauf had not been a Marine Corps sergeant himself. Perhaps a drill sergeant.

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Writer, Poet

## *SIMON J. ORTIZ*

Mattie Lee Thompson was a Grants High School teacher who was not afraid to teach. The reason I point that out is because Grants High is in a northwestern New Mexico town that in the 1950s went through rapid and traumatic cultural, economic, and social changes that tested the mettle of the area's citizens. Up to then, the region was isolated and mainly rural, having a population of Indian and Mexican-American people who were mostly farmers and ranchers with a scattering of Anglo merchants. And then uranium was discovered. Grants, a little town, grew to a city of 10,000; it became the center of a busy mining region, drawing miners and their families from all over the U.S. The population became radically diverse, representing Indians, Mexican-Americans, a few blacks, and Anglos (who grew quickly into the dominant majority). The ethnic and racial imbalance, and subsequent conflicts, were quickly felt in the school system. It was in my junior year in 1958 that Mattie Lee Thompson came to teach at the newly built high school.

As a hesitant and timorous American Indian teenager in a changing society, I was in a school that reflected the society around it—there was a "warlike" feeling at Grants High due to conflicts wrought by the social and economic schisms of racial and ethnic imbalance. Mexican-American and Anglo students fought each other, and the Indian students fought both groups because we were at the bottom. Not only did a teacher have to be skilled, perceptive, and creative, he or she also had to be brave and not afraid to teach in an interracial context. Grants High needed a teacher like "Mattie Lee," which is what she wanted to be called, not "Mrs." or "Miss Thompson."

She had an informal and direct personality, a loud voice, flaming red hair in a kind of frizzy upswept style, and she was enthusiastic about everything—especially literature. Through her compelling enthusiasm, Mattie Lee encouraged me not only to further my interest in literature but also to love the art of language. When she explicated Poe, Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Connor, she sometimes dramatized their stories by jumping on chairs and tables, using them as props, although she was more or less plump. Her personal style, combined with her flaming hair, beaming open face, a kind of wicked challenging glint in her eyes, her voice and excited movements appealed to me and held students' attention. She especially loved American literature, which oriented me to that literature more than any other besides the oral tradition of my Acoma Indian heritage. I think she perceived my expressive talents from the assignments I completed, and she encouraged me by "noticing" what I wrote. She also introduced me to socially conscious writers like Richard Wright, Theodore Dreiser, Mark Twain, and Carl Sandburg. These writers represented for me American literature; later I would try to emulate their works.

I don't know if Mattie Lee was deliberately working to bring about some manner of positive accommodation in racial relationships and understanding, but I think she did in any case by recognizing the accomplishments that Indian students, like myself, made in a school and social system that too often ignored them. To do that, she had to be a teacher who was not afraid to teach.

Teachers who are not afraid of teaching are rare, because teaching often is a formidable occupation, much more so in interracial schools and social systems which oftentimes are "warlike." These teachers have to be creative, perceptive, enthusiastic, compassionate, and it is often their personal style which encourages young people, who most need courage, to seek further and deeper knowledge. I'm happy and grateful that Mattie Lee Thompson was a teacher at Grants High School.

Minister

## *NORMAN VINCENT PEALE*

At Ohio Wesleyan University I was fortunate to complete an English major under a very great teacher, Professor William E. Smyser. Every lecture of his made students want to be masters of English.

Professor Smyser made me a lifelong disciple of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Marcus Aurelius, among others. He motivated me always to simplify. And he stressed the importance of using direct English language forms in writing and in speech.

I shall ever recall his oft-repeated statement, "Pure and precise English language is the greatest medium for expression and persuasion ever invented by mankind."

Indeed, I have found it to be so.

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Novelist

## *WALKER PERCY*

I recall my English teacher in Greenville High School (Mississippi)—Miss Hawkins. What I recall was not *what* she taught but rather that she loved English poetry. She had us memorize Shakespeare's sonnets, perhaps not a great pedagogical idea, but I have not forgotten. And she had us write sonnets, our own, both Shakespearean and Petrarchian! I acquired a certain facility and set up as a paid scribe, fifty cents per sonnet.

I hate to think of what she was paid as a public school teacher in Mississippi in the 1930s. Yet she had great dignity and status in the community. We honored her. We valued her poise. The odd thing is that I can't remember a single bit of her teaching. What she communicated was a love of literature. And that, I come to discover, was a rare gift indeed.

Psychiatrist

## *ALVIN F. POUSSAINT*

When I was in the fourth grade, I became ill with rheumatic fever and was hospitalized for six months. Ms. Salves visited me once or twice a month and supplied me with all of the curriculum materials I needed to keep up my class lessons. In addition, she sent me storybooks, which she purchased herself, to read while I was hospitalized.

Her stimulation of my interest in reading was a critical turning point, and that interest has become a lifelong habit. The warm and committed support of Ms. Salves helped to shape my life and success.

Educator

## *GLORIA RANDLE SCOTT*

My first day at Blackshear Elementary School, in Houston, Texas, brought me face-to-face with a tall, very dark-skinned woman who was quite thin but whose face radiated in a big warm smile that showed sturdy white beautiful teeth. This was Virginia Perry Norris. Little did I know that this woman, whose knees my head barely reached, would have a significant impact on my life, career, character, habits, and self-concept. "Little funny faces," she said, with her broad smile, "if you learn to read, you can have lots of fun. Oh, it is such fun to read and spell!" I did not know that she would set high expectations and then provide the motivation and support that I, one of the thirty children in her room, would need to try and realize some of those expectations! Now, forty-two years later, I am reflecting on the extremely significant influence and impact she has had on my life and career.

There were three reading groups in her room—top, middle, and bottom. We must have all started off at some common place and then been placed according to our achievement. I was highly motivated to be in the top group. She gave incentives, even at first

grade. The thrill and pride of getting a *gold star* for reading five pages without any errors, and knowing how to correctly spell all of the "new words" was enough to motivate me to learn to read anything that I could get my hands on.

By age seven, in the third grade, I was selling *The Houston Informer* on Saturdays and I had several customers because I could read. One regular customer was blind. He bought the paper because I could read almost all of it to him, and I got the chance to keep the paper and resell it!

I progressed through elementary school, always returning to the structure and discipline provided by Virginia Perry Norris. She made sure that her "little funny faces" kept up their work, because she kept intervening with our teachers to make sure we learned. Listening to her speak was a real joy, because she spoke well and always corrected us when we made careless or ignorant errors. She encouraged other teachers to give their very best in teaching us, because we were to be "tomorrow's leaders!"

She instilled in us, at a very young age, that reading was (1) the key to cultivating the imagination, (2) the access to knowledge, and (3) at one and the same time a skill and a tool with which to dissect the world of knowledge and information.

She would say, "Boys and girls, reading is the key to everything." She took us to the segregated branch of the Houston Public Library and got library cards for us. She practiced what she preached. She read and spoke well, providing an extremely important role model. Her teaching, expectations, and motivation to learn to read and to enjoy reading as the primary key to knowledge are woven throughout the tapestry of my life and constitute a basic part of any success that I have enjoyed. She provided the foundation for all of the other English teachers I had, most of whom made valuable contributions to my language understanding and use.

As an elementary teacher who had the extremely important, delicate task of building the language arts foundation for a life of reading, writing, and thinking for a tiny black girl from a family which was classified in the lower socioeconomic stratum, Virginia Perry Norris helped to shape the mind of one of America's leaders—me!

## *JOHN B. SLAUGHTER*

I think her name was Dr. Lowry. I seem to remember her face and manner much better than I can recall her name with certainty after nearly thirty-five years. I remember her because she taught a course in the history of English literature. It was a strange course for an electrical engineering major to take, but then my education, just like my subsequent career, has had a number of unusual and interesting twists and turns. Even today I tell people that I am the only engineer I know who can quote the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* in the original Middle English.

Dr. Lowry was a wonderful teacher who made the study of Bacon, Shelley, Keats, Shakespeare, and Milton lively and thoroughly enjoyable. She needled, goaded, encouraged, and even threatened her students in a firm but warm manner that made us want to please her with our knowledge and our skills of memorization. *Paradise Lost* became something you would want to understand because of a desire to please her even before you realized that it was something you were enjoying. Her classes were always full, and students seldom were absent. No one wanted to miss something rich and irrecoverable.

Ruth Lowry (as I write, her name comes more clearly to me now) loved English literature. It was clear that it had been her life pursuit and that she enjoyed nothing more than sharing it with her students. She sat behind her desk in the classroom asking the kinds of questions that brought life to the subject. We learned something about those famous names and the lives they led. We were able to surmise what was occurring to them as they wrote some of history's most notable and noble prose and poetry. Although I have not revisited the subject in any sustained manner since then, I exult when I encounter a sonnet or phrase that I studied in her class back in 1952.

Today I realize that Dr. Lowry had a greater impact upon my education than did most of those professors who gamely tried to teach me partial differential equations, strength of materials, electromagnetic wave theory, or any of those other abstruse courses required of a would-be engineer. For that, I shall forever be in her debt.

Poet

## *WILLIAM STAFFORD*

On the first day of sophomore English at El Dorado Junior College (Kansas) a new kind of teacher came into my life. Good teachers were frequent for me. They were responsible, receptive, ready to befriend. They had our careers in mind. They supported the sports programs and were hence part of school spirit. And so on. Then came Mr. Nixon.

He stood straight, spoke in a clipped, direct way, and went straight at the content of the course. He seemed to forget sports, careers, parents, all other distractions. And I began to realize that the content of our course was not content to be processed for us, but was a beam of light, an obsession, even, that waited to touch us alive.

I can't remember any techniques. Maybe Mr. Nixon was friendly or unfriendly. I can't remember—though he was certainly ready to respond, with information or counsel, when asked. But he was taken up with the literature that had brought him into teaching.

He often just read to us. I remember he read *Alcestis*. Whether others liked it, I don't remember. But with Mr. Nixon I was abruptly at large in a big world that contained magnificent questions and issues that dwarfed school spirit, careers, programs for the week. Our classroom was a window on the tremendous domain of books, and I began to see it.

Mr. Nixon, standing so straight there in the late afternoon sun reading *Alcestis*, I'll never forget you.

Writer

## *ALVIN TOFFLER*

Because I've been a passionate critic of our mass education system, I'm particularly delighted for the chance to pay public tribute to one English teacher who, despite being part of that system, made a difference to me.

I was one of six thousand kids in a big city high school, and, as such, hardly ever exchanged a personal word with any of my teachers. We were processed through the system.

Much of that "processing" seemed irrelevant to me at the time (and some still does). I knew from childhood that I wanted to be a writer. But what did that actually mean? How did one go about it? I received plenty of encouragement in this direction from my family. But not very much in school.

Not very much, that is, until one conversation with a birdlike, gray-haired English teacher whose name (I think) was Miss Carolan. I remember her trying somehow to express to a recalcitrant class the pleasure and richness of imagery that could be drawn from English literature. I recall her standing at the front of the classroom and actually singing, in a high chirpy voice, those lovely words of Robert Burns, "Flow gently sweet Afton . . . ."

I also remember the assignment we all dreaded: "Read Thomas Carlyle." We were, for the most part, the children of immigrants. Our grandparents or parents hailed from Italy, Poland, or Austria, from the ghettos of Russia. Some had fled the concentration camps of Germany. Others came from Africa, via the cotton fields of Alabama. Few had familial ties with the Anglo-Saxon culture our textbooks spread before us. And for most of us, Carlyle was not only boring and irrelevant, but impenetrable.

I made up my mind, dammit, that I would not only read the assignment, but the entire book. In the days that followed, I carried Carlyle with me everywhere, struggling through its fine print as I sat on the subway, rattling from Brooklyn to Manhattan, or on a bench in Prospect Park, or in my room at night. Slowly, painfully, I pushed on. At last, when the day came to report, I was probably the only kid in the class who had read beyond the assigned pages.

Miss Carolan took note of that.

Without making a fuss in the classroom, she called me aside and

asked me why I had bothered to read the whole book. What had I got from it? What did I want to be when I was older?

I confessed to literary ambitions. And what I thought I wanted to write was political commentary. I pointed to a column in the (pre-Murdoch) *New York Post*, by a writer named Samuel Grafton. "Something like that," I said.

"Wonderful," she replied. "If you want to write, you must 'play the sedulous ape!'"

What ape? Sedulous?

"'Play the sedulous ape,' is a phrase from Robert Louis Stevenson," she told me. Then she explained that what it meant was that a writer should study other writers closely, observe their structure and style, and actually try to mimic them as an exercise. Stevenson had carefully studied Wordsworth, Defoe, Hawthorne, even Baudelaire. Learning to write in the style of admired models would not merely help one develop a flexible command of different styles, but also to develop a truly personal style as well.

It was an elementary piece of craft advice, and even now, when I start a new book or essay, I often turn to a classic to see how its author worked, and I think again of Miss Carolan. But her message conveyed something far more fundamental than craft. For in that classroom conversation, for the first time, a teacher took my adolescent dream seriously, and let me think that even I could someday attain that magical seemingly unattainable goal: to be a writer!

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Teacher, Writer

## *DARWIN TURNER*

It is not easy to select one English teacher from among the many who shaped my development by influencing my writing and teaching styles and my approach to literary study or by offering advice and letters of recommendation. The one I wish to celebrate, however, is my sixth-grade teacher—my mother, Laura Knight Turner. Whatever else she taught me in my brief time in the sixth grade, I remember vividly only experiences related to language and literature; however much she influenced me as a parent, the aspect

of her influence that I wish to praise is her work during the time that she was paid to teach me.

Despite the fact that she had earned an M.A. in English and an M.S. in Education by the age of twenty-one (plus later study at Ohio State and Oxford), she taught in the sixth grade because, at that time, schools in Cincinnati, Ohio, appointed no black teachers to a grade beyond the ninth. Despite the location and the socioeconomic level of many of the students, all of whom were black, Laura Turner never presumed any limitation to the learning interests or abilities of the students. Instead, she used her imagination to transport us beyond that red-brick, fenced-in courtyard. With a local radio station that addressed a predominantly white audience (in Cincinnati, at that time, there was no black-oriented radio station), she arranged for our class to broadcast our discussion of travel in foreign countries. We talked geography, but we also studied ways to communicate with an unseen listening public—ways to enunciate and express ideas so that we could be understood. (Because no one had ever told her, she did not presume that inner-city blacks would gain security only if they communicated in a language unique to inner-city blacks.)

My more profound memory of that sixth-grade class is our dramatization of *The Iliad*. Using a translation intended for youthful readers, Laura Turner adapted that into a play that we staged in our cinder-stone playground. Dressed in homemade tunics, we chased each other with wooden swords while improvising appropriate epithets if we did not remember all that she had written. We did not know that, decades later, scholars would argue that inner-city school children have limited attention spans and lack interest in materials not related to inner-city life. As we shouted, "Menelaus!" and "Agamemnon!" (names that seemed no more strange than the "Ulysses" and "Darwin" of our classmates), we knew only that we enjoyed ourselves in a not-unfamiliar story (for some classmates) of a husband who, having lost his wife to another man, resorts to violence to bring her back.

When I was in the sixth grade, I did not appreciate my mother's excellence as a teacher—partly because her work at school did not seem different from what we did at home, but primarily because I did not know that all teachers of inner-city black students were not exploring the same kinds of activities. Three decades later, as a veteran in the observation of teaching practices and a bemused listener to too many scholarly papers lamenting the limitations of black elementary school students, I finally comprehended the value of a teacher who refused to believe that there is any student who cannot learn.

## *MONTANA H. R. WALKING BULL*

It is hard to single out a particular teacher or a professor as outstanding, for I have had many fine ones, but there are several people that stand out either as being excellent teachers or as having had a rather profound influence on my professional life. One such person was my teacher of junior English in high school in Norman, Oklahoma. Her name I have forgotten, but I have not forgotten that she stimulated in me a love of literature, and especially a love of poetry. She made poetry come alive. She taught me to get inside a poem and to roam around. She taught me the drama of poetry.

Another outstanding teacher was Professor Blickensderfer, who taught English at the University of Oklahoma. Dr. Blickensderfer stimulated in me a love of scholarship through his well-ordered system of instruction. Consequently, my study and research under his tutelage progressed logically and beautifully. He, by example, showed me what good organization of subject matter can accomplish. For me, as a teacher and professor, this has been invaluable.

Still another fine scholar and professor was Dr. Hubert Hoeltje, who taught English at the University of Oregon. Under Dr. Hoeltje, I studied colonial literature, as well as Melville, Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman. I found Hoeltje to be a wise man. He made me think I was wise, too, and when Robert Frost visited us at the University, there we were—three wise persons. It was fun!

But how can research be conducted without an archivist? So I must also mention Martin Schmitt, an outstanding librarian at the University of Oregon. Finally, there is Dr. Clarence Hines, professor of education at the University of Oregon, who thought I was able and bright enough to complete a doctor's degree at a time when women were not given much encouragement to seek higher degrees.

These people were dedicated to their profession and to their students. They made me feel it was all worthwhile—the struggle to stay in school, to learn in order to live life more abundantly. How lucky I was to know them and other fine teachers as well! Consequently, as a teacher and a professor, I have been able to pass on to others skills and knowledge they helped me acquire. The greatest ingredient any teacher can have is a positive approach, and these teachers excelled.

United States Poet Laureate

## *ROBERT PENN WARREN*

I went to a school in a village in southern Kentucky. That sounds unimpressive, but at least two of the teachers were impressive—at least to me—Mrs. McClardy, Mrs. Willet. These ladies taught Latin—and did it with imagination. I'll add I don't think now in most high schools the students are exposed to Milton's "Lycidas" or Elizabethan plays such as *The White Devil*. And at the Clarksville, Tennessee high school, Miss Lucy Bailey deserves my thanks, too.

Educator

## *CLIFTON R. WHARTON, JR.*

My most inspiring teacher of English wasn't an English teacher at all. She was my mother, and at the time when she married my father she taught college French and Latin, although her degree was in chemistry. She loved to read and loved books of all kinds—loved them with an intensity that overflowed and had to be communicated to others. It was a good thing, under the circumstances. During the 1930s my father, a forty-year career diplomat in the U.S. Foreign Service, was stationed in Spain's Canary Islands. Unlike today, there were then no American or International schools. Home leaves were few and far between, with transportation by slow boat rather than jumbo jet.

Surrounded by those who spoke Spanish, a very young boy tended naturally to gravitate toward that language most of the time. But it was important that I learn and become fluent in English, too. My mother enrolled me in the Calvert School correspondence courses—math, history, geography, and English. The work was interesting but as slow as the traveling. Mail moved by surface transport: you wrote your essay or exam, posted it, then squirmed through weeks of waiting for a grade, along with the next lesson.

In the meantime, my mother and I read some memorable books together. At the age of four, I started with the traditional *Mother*

*Goose* and the tales of Hans Christian Andersen. Next, there was *Aesop's Fables*, with its remarkable lithograph of the fox glaring up at the unattainable grapes. There was a volume of Robert Louis Stevenson's poetry, some of which I had to memorize and recite on request to entertain at my parents' frequent parties. I don't recall anything of the "See Dick Run" variety—but I did get *The Arabian Nights* at the age of five.

I recollect, too, a child's book of Greek mythology. No title comes to mind, though I can still see its grey binding and vivid red lettering. (I wonder why trivia are often the most durable remembrances?)

One day, reading aloud the myth of Perseus, I found myself struggling with a difficult passage. "Clifton," my mother suggested, "don't read with your ear—read with your eye. *Visualize* the story. See it in your mind." It happened that we were at the point where Perseus slays the Medusa. I looked at the words on the page and tried to see them as images in my mind. For a moment the screen was blank. Then the picture was suddenly and fully there: the Medusa's writhing serpents, the desperate hero, the shield reflecting like a mirror, the sweeping flash of a sword.

From that day on, reading meant something altogether different—and always in living technicolor.

Today my mother—my teacher—is nearing her eighty-sixth birthday. Her sight is failing. But nothing so insignificant could make her relinquish her great joy in reading. She has, after all, grandchildren (before too long, perhaps great grandchildren) who can read to her. And every one of us, I think, figured out a long time ago who was doing the greater service for whom.

Novelist

## *HERMAN WOUK*

My eighth-grade English teacher, Miss Sarah Dickson, at P.S. 75, The Bronx, told me when I was eleven that I would be a writer, and asked that I dedicate my first book to her. It was most inspiring. I remember well her reading aloud of "Evangeline," and her perceptive appreciation of my early composition efforts.

In the end I dedicated my first novel to Professor Irwin Edman, my great philosophy teacher and friend at Columbia College. But I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to a superb English teacher, Sarah Dickson, may she rest in peace.

Author, Children's Books

## *JANE YOLEN*

All my life I have wanted some way to tell V. Louise Higgins, who taught high school English at Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut, that I loved her. That, of course, would have greatly embarrassed V. Louise (as we called her in awe and admiration behind her back). She was a woman of acerbic wit, of incredibly high standards as far as the language is concerned, with an uncompromising stance: you *will* love literature. And we did.

I think we loved literature because V. Louise did, and at first we wanted her admiration. And then the literature took over, snuck up behind us, and clobbered us. I stuck through the first one hundred pages of *War and Peace*—in fact started it several times, getting bogged down in Russian patronymics—because I thought V. Louise would like a book report on such a thick and famous book. I can't tell you how many times since I have reread that book with pleasure in the book itself. (I even minored in Russian literature in college.) Thanks, V. Louise.

Of course I was a reader before I got to V. Louise's class, but I was a better reader having left it. I stopped just galloping through books and learned to pause, look about, and savor the pathways. I learned that one could be critical yet still love a book or, conversely,

one could hate a book (*Ethan Frome* was in this category) and still admire things about it. Thanks, V. Louise.

I don't know if Miss Higgins is still alive, but if she is, I know she is still reading. Some small part of me hopes that she has read something of mine, and smiled that wonderful "gotcha" smile, remembering.